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The Humanities: Their Value, Defence, Crisis, and Future

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The humanities – literature, history, philosophy, and arts – seem always to have to justify their value and legitimacy vis-à-vis other, more practical, more useful, or more authoritative aspects of human life and activities. Within the humanities, the value and legitimacy of literature and the arts in particular are often brought in question. Plato (in)famously dismissed poetry – "this business of imitation" – as "concerned with the third remove from truth" (Plato 1963: 827), and for setting up "in each individual soul a vicious constitution by fashioning phantoms far removed from reality" (830). In the ancient quarrel between poetry and philosophy, Plato unquestionably stood on the side of philosophy. In ancient China, Confucius was not quite so inimical to poetry, but he considered *wen* – a word that connotes literature or letters in general – as something not of the first priority, a subject for the young person to study only when he has completed all the more basic exercises in moral education and "yet has some extra energy left" (Liu Baonan 1957: 10). Of course, even from a practical point of view, to have knowledge of *wen* or the literary art has its benefit as it makes one a more elegant and effective speaker. Confucius once told his son: "If you do not study *Poetry*, you will have nothing in your speech" (Liu Baonan 1957: 363). He considers literary cultivation important for the improvement of language and communication skills when he admonishes his students: "If you speak without any embellishment (*wen*), your words will not go far enough" (Zuo Qiuming et al. 1999: 1024). At a time when presentation and persuasion were essential in speaking to kings and princes for offering political advice or completing diplomatic missions, the study of poetry for acquiring the art of speech found its place as a useful tool. Rhetoric was thus as important a subject in a Confucian education program as it was in the West as part of the classical curriculum, but in both traditions, rhetoric was considered useful insofar as it facilitated expression and communication, but it was not thought to be valuable in its own right.

Beginning with Aristotle, however, a long tradition of apologetics or defence of poetry emerged in the West that positively asserted its intrinsic value and claimed for it a "more philosophical and more serious" status than history (Aristotle 1987: 12). As Stephen Halliwell observes, Aristotle distinguishes "the nature of poetry from activities such as history and philosophy, with which it shares an interest in the world of human action and experience. The practitioners of history and philosophy are taken to strive for direct truths about reality: particulars about the past, in the one

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case, and universal or general truths in the other" (Halliwell 1989: 153). In contrast to history and philosophy and striving for indirect truth about reality, poetry is restricted neither by the particulars of historical reality nor by the abstract universals of philosophical speculation; rather, it conveys universal or general truths in and through particular images, events, and actions in an imaginary world of literary fiction. That indeed becomes a standard argument for the higher value of poetry above history and philosophy. As Sir Philip Sidney put it, the historian, "wanting the precept, is so tied, not to what should be but to what is, to the particular truth of things and not to the general reason of things, that his example draweth no necessary consequence, and therefore a less fruitful doctrine." The poet on the other hand, when compared with the philosopher, always illustrates "the general notion with the particular example," and "yieldeth to the powers of the mind an image of that whereof the philosopher bestoweth but a wordish description" (Sidney 1970: 27). The value of poetry thus lies in its greater pedagogic efficacy in addition to its aesthetic appeal or, rather, poetry is a better teacher because of its aesthetic appeal, for it teaches in a more pleasing, and therefore a more effective manner. Poetry thus performs two tasks at the same time: "to teach goodness and to delight the learners" (Sidney 1970: 50). Such a concept of poetry presupposes a truth or value that poetry can teach and the positive influence it may have on the mind and character of its readers. That influence, the ability of poetry or literature to "make many more beastly than beasts begin to hear the sound of virtue" (Sidney 1970: 30), constitutes a core value of a humanist education. For Sidney as for many other humanists, the idea of literature's humanizing influence was taken for granted; the "sound of virtue" and the "goodness" that poetry can teach were not to be questioned.

Traditionally, classics, the best works in the world's various literary traditions, exemplify the intrinsic value of poetry or literature; and the many discussions of the nature of a classic text or author constitute a continuous and yet ever-changing argument for the value and significance of the humanities in general. For Sainte-Beuve in the 19th century, for example, the classic author is one "who has enriched the human mind, increased its treasure, and caused it to advance a step; who has discovered some moral and not equivocal truth, or revealed some eternal passion in that heart where all seemed known and discovered"; and more significantly, such an author addresses all readers and speaks in a style that is both "his own" and "also that of the whole world, a style new without neologism, new and old, easily contemporary with all time" (Sainte-Beuve 1900: 3–4). Sainte-Beuve's concept of the classic is expansive, constantly changing, and inclusive, for he believes that "the temple of taste" should admit more and more great writers and poets, and "its reconstruction is merely a matter of enlargement, so that it may become the home of all noble human beings, of all who have permanently increased the sum of the mind's delights and possessions" (9). In his "temple of taste" or pantheon of classics, not only Homer, but also the Hindu poets Valmiki and Vyasa and the Persian poet Firdousi all find places. In such a cosmopolitan conceptualization, all classic authors, both ancient and modern, can speak to one another with perfect mutual understanding: "Solon, Hesiod, Theognis, Job, Solomon, and why not Confucius, would welcome the cleverest moderns," says Sainte-Beuve in a refreshingly optimistic vein, for "those who put human morality into maxims, and those who in simple fashion sang it, would converse together in rare and gentle speech, and would not be surprised at understanding each other's meaning at the very first word" (10). In this 19th-century concept of the classic, the crucial element is again the teaching of values – the enrichment of the human mind, the discovery of moral truth, the revelation of some eternal passion, conveyed to all readers in a perfect form beyond the separation of time and space, or languages and cultures.

If in ancient and medieval times, poetry and literature often had to justify their worth before politics and religion, in more recent modern times, it is the predominance of science with its practical application in technology that puts pressure on the humanities for proof of value and legitimacy.

Perhaps the debate on the “two cultures” aroused by C. P. Snow’s Rede Lecture at Cambridge University in May 1959 is still revealing in this regard. Snow identified two groups, “literary intellectuals at one pole – at the other, scientists,” as being completely separated by their specialization in both education and profession (Snow 1998: 4). He began by portraying the two groups as mutually incapable of understanding each other, but his argument soon turned out to be not for educating students in both science and literary culture, but for supplanting the whole of literary culture with science. Snow had in mind a much larger issue of the leadership role of the West in world affairs, and he argued that an industrial or scientific revolution was the only way to address the problems of poverty and underdevelopment in much of the world’s population outside the West. “Most of our fellow human beings,” he remarked in a morally lofty tone, “are underfed and die before their time. In the crudest terms *that* is the social condition. There is a moral trap which comes through the insight into man’s loneliness: it tempts one to sit back, complacent in one’s unique tragedy, and let the others go without a meal.” Now this “moral trap” was what Snow detected in modernist literature, a trap that “literary intellectuals” were prone to fall in, while scientists as a group “fall into that trap less than others” (Snow 1998: 6–7). Though trained in science and having a moderately successful career as a novelist, Snow in *The Two Cultures* lecture clearly spoke on behalf of science and condemned “literary intellectuals” as “natural Luddites” (Snow 1998: 22), stubbornly resistant to the progress and opportunities made available by the advancement of science. In his view, science was always forward-looking for a better future of mankind, while “traditional culture” was conservative, even reactionary, in holding on to the past while denying any hope for the future. He declared that “the scientists have the future in their bones,” but “the traditional culture responds by wishing the future did not exist” (Snow 1998: 11). Given the political tension of the Cold War era and the danger posed by the competition for nuclear armaments at the time when he delivered his Rede Lecture, Snow seemed naively ignorant of or strangely oblivious to the horrible war machines and destructive weapons then being created by that same advancement of science, and he appeared completely to deny the significance of history for understanding the present and putting the future into perspective when he dismissed traditional culture as merely backward-looking.

It is not surprising that Snow’s lecture provoked an angry response from F. R. Leavis, a staunch defender of “traditional culture” at the time in Cambridge University, but whose scornful invective against Snow was generally received with disapproval by many contemporary commentators. Leavis was totally dismissive of Snow’s position, and furthermore tried to discredit Snow as a novelist: “Snow is, of course, a – no, I can’t say that; he isn’t: Snow thinks of himself as a novelist … He can’t be said to know what a novel is” (Leavis 1963: 31). Such a virulent challenge to Snow’s credentials amounted, as Lionel Trilling put it, to “an attack of unexampled ferocity” (Trilling 2000: 403), and struck “a bad tone, an impermissible tone” (406). Nevertheless, Trilling recognized that “we must do him (Leavis) the justice of seeing that the Rede Lecture denies, and in an extreme way, all that he has ever believed about literature – it is, in fact, nothing less than an indictment of literature on social and moral grounds”; and that “there can be no other interpretation of (Snow’s) lecture than that it takes toward literature a position of extreme antagonism” (Trilling 2000: 407). Trilling observed that neither Snow nor Leavis mentioned the fact that their debate had been anticipated by an earlier one, occasioned by a similar Rede Lecture, entitled “Literature and Science,” which was delivered by Matthew Arnold at Cambridge in 1882 as a response to Thomas Huxley’s plea for making science the foundation of modern education. In his introduction to a new edition of the published version of Snow’s *Two Cultures* lecture, Stefan Collini also notes that “the ‘Leavis-Snow controversy’ can obviously be seen as a re-enactment of a familiar clash in English cultural history – the Romantic versus the Utilitarian, Coleridge versus Bentham, Arnold versus Huxley, and other less celebrated examples” (Snow 1998: xxxv). To put this debate into such a historical perspective

reveals the continuity of the controversy as well as some significant changes that it has undergone. It was in the late 19th century that science started to challenge the superior position of literary culture in the intellectual scheme of things, at a time when the Germans defined *Geisteswissenschaften* in contra-distinction to *Naturwissenschaften*. For Arnold, however, it was definitely culture, not natural science, that provided the core value for human life, and it was literature as the vehicle for the "criticism of life" that contained the moral strength for life's betterment.

That was essentially also the conviction of F. R. Leavis, and of Lionel Trilling as well. At the conclusion of his response to Snow, Leavis still hoped, in language that strongly reminds us of Arnold, that literature did the creative work "on the contemporary intellectual-cultural frontier in maintaining the critical function," and that "Cambridge might become a place where the culture of the Sunday papers was not taken to represent the best that is thought and known in our time" (Leavis 1963: 50). Readers of literature would know, said Trilling for his part in his essay on the "Snow-Leavis controversy," that "if a work of literature has any true artistic existence, it has value as a criticism of life; in whatever complex way it has chosen to speak, it is making a declaration about the qualities that life should have, about the qualities life does not have but should have" (Trilling 2000: 419). To a large extent, this refers back to the Aristotelian or the humanist defence of poetry as representing not what is, but what should be, thus teaching universal or general truths about reality, and also presumes that poetry has moral values as well as aesthetic ones and can exert a positive influence upon society as a whole.

If Arnold treated Huxley cordially because he was confident of the unchallenged value and superior position of high literary culture in his time, Leavis quarreled angrily with Snow because he may well have perceived in Snow's declarations a real threat to the position of that literary culture in his contemporary era. As Collini remarks, Leavis was reacting against what he regarded as "the 'technologico-Benthamite' reduction of human experience to the quantifiable, the measurable, the manageable" (Snow 1998: xxxiii). Snow may not have prevailed in the "two cultures" debate when he first delivered his Rede Lecture, but fifty years later, he seems to have come out on top because of the now clearly apparent tendency of modern societies and education systems to privilege applied research and practical outcomes, and to evaluate scholarly work strictly in terms of "the quantifiable, the measurable, the manageable," which, as Collini observes, "makes it easier to justify fundamental research in the natural sciences, with its promise of medical, industrial, and similar applications, than to justify what is anyway only with some awkwardness called 'research' in the humanities" (Snow 1998: lx). That is indeed the social and scholarly milieu that humanities scholars in many places find themselves part of nowadays, but what poses a more serious challenge, or even a crisis for the humanities, is not just the unpropitious time and environment for exercising their disciplines, but an internal questioning of the value and legitimacy of culture and tradition by literary scholars and cultural theorists themselves.

Let us recall some of the most telling moments in the theoretical reflections on culture and the humanities of the last few decades. Toward the end of *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault made an announcement that has become so widely known among scholars in the humanities that it has largely lost its initial shocking effect of reading as an obituary, the obituary of man himself. In a famous passage in that book, Foucault claimed that "man did not exist (any more than life, or language, or labour); and the human sciences did not appear" until the 19th century, when the modern *episteme* made an abrupt turn to man as the privileged object, with psychology, economics, and philology as the three basic models or paradigms (Foucault 1973: 344). Thus the archaeology of knowledge revealed that "man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end." With a shift in the paradigm, said Foucault in his prophetic postface, "one can certainly wager that man would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (387). Jacques Derrida's

reflection on humanism gives another influential reading of man as the invention of the human sciences and as fading or drawing close to its end. For Derrida, the end of man is intricately involved with the *relève* of humanism and metaphysics, the fulfilment of man as his own end or *telos*. "Man is that which is in relation to his end, in the fundamentally equivocal sense of the word," says Derrida. "The transcendental end can appear to itself and be unfolded only on the condition of mortality, of a relation to finitude as the origin of ideality. The name of man has always been inscribed in metaphysics between these two ends. It has meaning only in this eschato-teleological situation" (Derrida 1982: 123).

These are difficult propositions, and whatever their complexity and sophistication in the original context of theoretical elaborations, they have practical consequences that often neglect the finer points and painstaking stratification of a theoretical discourse. Thus *la fin de 1'homme* or the "end of man" has turned into a sort of slogan, a popular banner under which the human sciences, or the humanities in higher education, have come under serious challenge and been subject to deconstruction.

The relationship between theory in its originating context and its large-scale application inevitably leads to uncontrollable outgrowths, a relationship Foucault himself characterized as that between "the initiation of a discursive practice" and its "ulterior transformations" (Foucault 1977: 132). The "initiators of discursive practices," of whom Marx and Freud are Foucault's prime examples, "not only made possible a certain number of analogies that could be adopted by future texts, but, as importantly, they also made possible a certain number of differences. They cleared a space for the introduction of elements other than their own, which, nevertheless, remain within the field of discourse they initiated" (Foucault 1977: 132). These words describe the relationship between such "initiators of discursive practices" as Marx and Freud and such practices as Marxism and Freudianism, but they can describe just as effectively the relationship between Foucault and Derrida as "initiators of discursive practices" and their numerous explicators and followers, and also the relationship between a novel theoretical concept like the "end of man" and the reality in our universities and the societies at large, in which the humanities are going through a profound crisis of relevance and legitimacy. Linking the idea of the "end of man" with the crisis in the humanities may not be all that direct, but the postmodern critique of humanism and the deconstruction of human sciences certainly provide a theoretical framework for understanding the current crisis, in which the "end of man" readily serves as a sign of the serious challenge that the humanities are facing at the present.

For it is indeed evident that the humanities are currently in the grip of a profound malaise. Nancy Warehime argues that "liberal education, particularly the humanities, is in crisis. The discourse or rhetoric of crisis has come from a variety of diverse sources, from the political Left as well as the Right, from academic humanists, administrators, bureaucrats, and the popular press" (Warehime 1993: 1). In *Troubled Times for American Higher Education*, Clark Kerr offered a panoramic survey of higher education in the 1990s in order to find out why universities were facing difficult times, and why the humanities in particular were experiencing a crisis greater than that which the other segments of higher education were encountering. What Kerr described equally applies in many other higher education systems, not just in America. In one sense, his depiction of "troubled times" may provide an illuminating background for understanding the idea of the "end of man." One recurrent theme in Kerr's book is the increasingly dominant connection between universities and market economies. In effect, the great transformation of American higher education in the last three and half centuries, from its incipient mission of clergy training to its current status as "the key to the nation's competitiveness," constitutes a long journey, as Kerr puts it, "from serving God to serving Mammon" (Kerr 1994: 51).

Modern education has, to be sure, a secular orientation and strong ties with business, industry, and the world of the professions. And yet, while the university's connection with the market economy provides it with a greater number of funding sources, from private or corporate as well as governmental agencies, this connection also involves the danger of losing academic autonomy and independence. One of the basic and near-universal trends, as Kerr points out, is the tendency of present-day governments to guide higher education "more in the direction of applied research, of applications of research, and of polytechnic skill training, and away from 'pure scholarship'" (Kerr 1994: 3). This trend has consequently fostered in the student population a much more practical mentality than ever before and, as a result, "enrollments have shifted heavily to professional schools, and the humanities and social sciences, in particular, have lost" (Kerr 1994: 66). It has pushed "academic activity toward favored areas, such as business administration and engineering . . . and away from the liberal arts" (Kerr 1994: 73–74). That certainly describes the current situation in most universities and academic institutions.

In that general context, which extends beyond the usual bounds of literary or cultural criticism, the argument for the "end of man" appears more and more like a sort of theoretical legitimization of such a social condition, a justification for the complete abandonment of the humanities. Indeed, in describing the postmodern condition, François Lyotard declared some time ago that the question for "the professional student, the State, or institutions of higher education" is no longer a question of truth but of utility, that it is no longer appropriate to ask, "Is it true?" but "Is it saleable?" "Is it efficient?" (Lyotard 1984: 51). When efficiency and utility are calculated in economic terms as saleability, then the humanities can only be seen as inefficient and irrelevant, charged with elitism, impracticality, and anachronism. In the hard times of financial crisis and economic downturn, the humanities, as a *New York Times* article reported, are under tremendous pressure "to justify their existence to administrators, policy makers, students and parents. Technology executives, researchers and business leaders argue that producing enough trained engineers and scientists is essential to America's economic vitality, national defense and health care. Some of the staunchest humanities advocates, however, admit that they have failed to make their case effectively" (Cohen 2009: C1). Those defending the humanities have failed to make their case, not only because the humanities cannot produce commodities that are readily saleable or weapons that are useful for national defence, but also because, more significantly, many scholars working in the humanities in the latter half of the 20th century have themselves abandoned the idea that arts and literature, or the humanities in general, can teach the core values of a worthy life of moral goodness.

In the face of such an internal challenge, the traditional argument for the worth of the humanities in teaching values is no longer so solid. The questioning of traditional culture and the classics comes not from science, as in C. P. Snow's argument of 1959, but from a changed social condition. Humanities subjects, as Alvin Kernan puts it, "have proven extremely sensitive to pressures for social change in the society at large, to the wave of populist democracy, to technological changes in communication, to relativistic epistemologies, to demands for increased tolerance, and to various social cause, such as black studies, feminism, and gay rights" (Kernan 1997: 3). That was particularly true of the 1990s, when "identity politics" and "decanonization" of the traditional classics joined forces in transforming higher education, especially though not exclusively in American universities. The classics, traditionally understood as the repositories of moral, social, and spiritual values, what Sainte-Beuve in an earlier time called the "temple of taste," came under attack as the embodiments of repressive ideologies of the patriarchy, the ruling elites, or the colonialist empires.

How different the situation has now become from that of Sainte-Beuve can be seen in the remarks made by Frank Kermode, one of the pre-eminent critics in our time, who has drawn attention to the thriving of iconoclastic approaches to literary studies in modern academia. At the outset

of his book *Shakespeare's Language*, Kermode makes clear that he particularly dislikes certain "modern attitudes" toward Shakespeare, "the worst of them maintains that the reputation of Shakespeare is fraudulent, the result of an eighteenth-century nationalist or imperialist plot. A related notion, almost equally presumptuous, is that to make sense of Shakespeare we need first to see the plays as involved in the political discourse of his day to a degree that has only now become intelligible." Such debunking and politicization of Shakespeare, Kermode goes on to say, do not just show "a recurring need to find something different to say," but they constitute an arrogant dismissal of earlier critics like Johnson, Keats, and Coleridge "as victims of imperialistic brainwashing." That represents a typical result of the "decanonization" taking place in contemporary criticism, but, says Kermode sarcastically: "if you can rubbish Shakespeare you can also rubbish these and comparable authorities; respect for them is merely another instance of our acceptance of unexamined bourgeois valuations. But in the end you can't get rid of Shakespeare without abolishing the very notion of literature" (Kermode 2000: viii). The debate on Shakespeare may be a small indicator of a much larger issue, but it is also a revealing case which helps us understand the challenge to the belief in the values of the humanities that is taking place at the heart of the discipline itself.

Kermode's effort to reappropriate the textuality of Shakespeare's language in response to heavily political and ideological over-interpretation points to an effective way to affirm the intrinsic values of the classic, and thereby to emerge from the crisis of the humanities. It refuses to examine the literary classic in terms of "the saleable," or "the quantifiable, the measurable, the manageable." As Anthony Kronman is quoted as saying, it is precisely the mentality of judging everything in terms of economic gains and profits that has made the need of the humanities "if anything, more urgent today," particularly in view of "the widespread indictment of greed, irresponsibility and fraud [that have] led to the financial meltdown." In his view this is the appropriate time to re-examine "what we care about and what we value," a task which the humanities "are extremely well-equipped to address" (Cohen 2009: C1). In other words, a re-examination of the values of the humanities as exemplified by the classics for their contribution to human life and human experience may change the terms of debate and lead to a better hope for the humanities' future.

Again, we may take Frank Kermode's recent discussion of the classic as a starting point. In his Tanner Lectures at the University of California at Berkeley, presented in November 2001 and published in 2004, Kermode spoke about the classic and emphasized *pleasure* and *change* as two important aspects of what constitutes the literary canon. Kermode holds it "to be a necessary though not obvious requirement of the canon that it should give pleasure" (Kermode 2004: 20). For Sir Philip Sidney in the 16th century, as we have discussed earlier, poetry both taught and gave delight, and the pleasure of reading was hardly in need of argument. In contemporary criticism, however, as Kermode notes, many literary scholars, whose business it is to talk about literature, have "ceased to talk much about literature, sometimes dismissing the notion that there was really any such thing, and inventing new things to talk about, for instance, gender and colonialism. These matters being beyond question urgent, it seemed natural to stop discussing literature as such, except when it seemed profitable to deny its existence" (Kermode 2004: 16). In the politicization of literature and in cultural studies, the pleasure of reading and the appreciation of the social and moral utility of literature seem to have dropped out of sight completely. Therefore, to reaffirm these principles as important dimensions of the literary canon becomes an attempt to reclaim the values of the classic and the aesthetics of this canon, which have so often been neglected in contemporary literary theory and criticism.

Of course, pleasure is not a simple feeling of enjoyment, for in a discussion of theoretical reflections from Plato to Freud, and referring to such modern critics as Kenneth Burke, Peter Brooks and

Roland Barthes, Kermode reminds us that aesthetic pleasure is often complex, even philosophical, "a curious blend of delight and dismay" (Kermode 2004: 28). The experience of a tragic drama, as Aristotle argues in the *Poetics*, can be aesthetically pleasurable. Yet, "to speak of pleasure alone does not seem enough," says Kermode, "though pleasure and the possibility of its repeated disappointment and satisfaction, is one key to canonicity" (Kermode 2004: 30). The pleasure of reading is what brings people to literature in the first place, and that aesthetic sensibility, as Kermode reiterates in his response to comments arising out of the discussion of his position, should be a prerequisite for a literary critic. "My present answer to the question how to be a critic is one I borrowed long ago from William Empson: take what theoretical help you fancy, but follow your nose." And he goes on to add: "Not everybody has a nose in this sense – there is an enological analogy – and in either case, if you don't have one, you should seek some other form of employment" (Kermode 2004: 85). The point may be a simple one – if you don't find pleasure in literature, don't pretend to be a literary critic – but it becomes important to emphasize the dimension of aesthetic pleasure in this particular era when literary works are often used as so many social, historical, or political documents to comment on other subjects and for other purposes.

Kermode's emphasis on the capacity for "change" of the literary canon purports to distance his personal concept of what makes a classic from the earlier idea of the "timeless classic," which is rejected by most critics today. "Changes in the canon," says Kermode, "obviously reflect changes in ourselves and our culture. It is a register of how our historical self-understandings are formed and modified" (Kermode 2004: 36). In fact, any survey of history will show that the canon is not a fixed list of "great books" that never changes, though many classics remain more or less constant on the list throughout the centuries despite the capricious vagaries of taste and fashion. A "timeless classic," however, may not mean a classic remaining unchanged in time, but rather, as Sainte-Beuve puts it, a work "easily contemporary with all time." That is roughly what Hans-Georg Gadamer means when he argues that the classical "speaks in such a way that it is not a statement about what is past – documentary evidence that still needs to be interpreted – rather, it says something to the present as if it were said specifically to it. […] The classical, then, is certainly 'timeless,' but this timelessness is a mode of historical being" (Gadamer 1989: 289–290). This "timelessness" refers to what Gadamer calls [the] "contemporaneity" (*Gleichzeitigkeit*) in the experience of a work of art. "This contemporaneity and presentness of aesthetic being is generally called its timelessness. But this timelessness has to be thought of together with the temporality to which it essentially belongs. Timelessness is primarily only a dialectical feature which arises out of temporality and in contrast with it" (Gadamer 1989: 121). "Contemporaneity," he further explains, "means that in its presentation this particular thing that presents itself to us achieves full presence, however remote its origin may be" (127). The experience of art or the reading of literature has the peculiar quality of immediate presence in the sense that we are involved emotionally and intellectually with the art work, with its fictional world and characters, even though the work may come from a remote past and a very different cultural, social, and historical milieu. Contemporaneity of the aesthetic experience thus highlights our participation in and interaction with the work of art or literature, and the classic becomes "timeless," not because it is related to some sort of eternal or transcendental essence beyond temporality, but because it is read, understood, interpreted, and appreciated differently by people in different times, while at the same time it retains its own identity and values that constitute a measurement or rule (which is what *canon* originally means) against which the present can be judged.

Certain values of the classic, aesthetic and otherwise, do indeed transcend its immediate historical context to reach us in our own historical moment, and that capacity is also a necessary prerequisite of the literary canon. For that reason, the positive values exemplified in the classics need to

be re-examined and brought to critical attention. In this regard, the recent rise of world literature as a new and burgeoning field of literary studies is quite encouraging, because works studied in world literature are those "that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language" (Damrosch 2003: 4). Thus, world literature offers a wide range of representative works from various traditions that cannot be dismissed as part of the old Western canon, but expands it to include non-Western classics that have been canonized in very different social and historical conditions and yet have values that are not limited to their historical moment, and are thus able to address readers other than their originally intended ones. To a large extent, decanonization is very much a contemporary phenomenon in Western literary and cultural studies, but the situation is different beyond the boundaries of Western academia, where traditional culture still retains its values and learning is still respected in its own right.

The idea that learning is valuable in itself is of course an important affirmation of the humanities both in the East and the West. The very first line in the Confucian *Analects* is a joyful celebration of that idea, for the Master said: "Is it not a great pleasure to learn and to practise what one has learned from time to time?" (Liu Baonan 1957: 1). The strong emphasis on learning as a life-long process is deeply entrenched in the Chinese tradition that had early on designed an elaborate system of examinations for the recruitment of civil servants and officials, and made learning and knowledge highly respected among people of all social strata, including the poor and the illiterate. Under the influence of such a Confucian emphasis on learning, education was firmly believed to be the most important means to the cultivation of a person's mind and moral character, and also the most effective avenue for social mobility. Although since the beginning of the 20th century, the content of education programmes has changed from an exclusive concentration on Confucian classics to a broad curriculum spanning both arts and sciences, the cultural habit of putting emphasis on learning and education remains strong in Chinese communities, and there is always retained a sense of history and tradition that gives a specifically cultural significance to the Chinese idea of education.

In a recent book on ancient Greek and traditional Chinese cultures, G. E. R. Lloyd urges us to draw strength from some of the ideas embedded in these ancient traditions. "One of the Chinese lessons is to value the past, though that should not be to the neglect of the present and the future. One of the Greek ones is to value education in and for itself – as opposed to valuing it for the qualifications for a career that it may provide" (Lloyd 2004: 142). In both Greek and Chinese traditions, education is mainly concerned with the cultivation of the person, and if moral and political philosophies have human beings and their social relationships as the basis for their thought, then the focus on man as the privileged object of philosophical investigation, despite Foucault's argument to the contrary, […] had actually existed long before the nineteenth century, as it characterized both the Socratic and the Confucian thinking in the fifth century BC, an age when Greek poets, historians and natural philosophers were already discoursing on moral and social issues that formed public debates in the democratic assembly. "The distinctive contribution of Socrates" in that context, as Martha Nussbaum maintains, "was to bring sustained unrelenting philosophical argument to bear on these issues of communal concern – as Cicero later put it, bringing philosophy from the heavens down to earth" (Nussbaum 1997: 20). In her book *Cultivating Humanity* Nussbaum also draws from the classical tradition to rebuild the foundation for a strong liberal education and thus the values underpinning a common humanity. A "liberal education," she argues, is an education that "liberates the mind from the bondage of habit and custom, producing people who can function with sensitivity and alertness as citizens of the whole world" (Nussbaum 1997: 8). Such an understanding of a liberal education contrasts markedly with the postmodern critique of humanism and offers a much-needed remedy for the fragmentation of society, the decline of civic participation and the loss of the sense of community in the university and in society at large. By arguing for the

significance of classic texts for promoting a critical spirit of self-examination, by insisting on the relevance of developing the Stoic ideal of the citizen of the world, and particularly by strongly promoting the reading of literature for its edifying function of taking us, through a leap of compassionate imagination, outside of ourselves or our small circle of group identities, Nussbaum makes philosophy and literature the centrepieces of a liberal education. In her argument, the humanities are not just central to higher education, but to the decent life of a citizen in the democratic society. The power of literature to expand our vision and to transform us in compassion is crucial to higher education as is the most effective means of cultivating the mind and of forming a basic conviction of the equal worth of all human beings despite their racial, cultural, and all other kinds of differences.

In a similar spirit, Umberto Eco sees literature as exerting a great "intangible power" upon us; it is "the power of that network of texts which humanity has produced and still produces, not for practical ends (such as records, commentaries on laws and scientific formulae, minutes of meetings or train schedules), but rather, for its own sake, for humanity's own enjoyment – and which are read for pleasure, spiritual edification, broadening of knowledge, or maybe just to pass the time, without anyone forcing us to read them" (Eco 2002: 1). Without the influence of literature's "intangible power," there will be the deprivation of the soul and moral character. "The wretches who roam around aimlessly in groups and kill people by throwing stones from a highway bridge or setting fire to a child – whoever these people are," says Eco, they "turn out this way … because they are excluded from the universe of literature and from those places where, through education and discussion, they might be reached by a glimmer from the world of values that stems from and sends us back again to books" (Eco 2002: 4). Here we find one of the foremost writers and literary scholars of today reaffirming his strong belief in the values that literature can teach, and the critical function that literature can perform in our contemporary world. In taking up the challenge to the humanities, it is indeed important to reaffirm the broad goal of education, particularly higher education, as cultivating the mind rather than as purely vocational training for a career. "Education is not a commodity," as Geoffrey Lloyd puts it categorically. "Rather it is a basic human value" (Lloyd 2004: 152). It is by reaffirming the humanist values for the life of each person that we can change the terms by which we discuss knowledge and education, so facing the challenge successfully and reclaiming the central place of the humanities in the curriculum of a truly liberal education.

Given the world we live in and its emphasis on the practical, the quantifiable, the measurable, it is certainly not easy to change the terms of debate and argue for the values of the humanities and liberal education, but that is exactly what scholars in the humanities have to do. At the dawning of our cultural traditions, Socrates and Confucius were essentially educators, teachers with groups of disciples or followers. Their career was not, in their own time, marked by any spectacular success. Traveling with his students from one place to another, Confucius never succeeded in convincing any prince to adopt his political philosophy and implement his social ideals, and he was even ridiculed by his contemporaries as "the one who does what he knows cannot be done" (Liu Baonan 1957: 325). But what else can better characterize the spirit of an educator and intellectual who strives to make a difference against the predominant tendencies of his times? We become docile conformists if we do only what can be safely done: it is always those who dare to do what they believe to be the right thing that best exemplify the energy of creativity and the critical spirit of social and cultural transformation. Neither Socrates nor Confucius succeeded in gaining much power in any political sense in their own time, but they did what they believed in and became the most powerful and influential thinkers of their respective cultural traditions. Theirs are exemplary

cases for us to follow today. To re-emphasize the importance of the humanities is not to denigrate the great contribution that modern science and technology have made to our world, but we must not forget that our world is the world of human beings, in which what makes us human must remain the most important of all our concerns and endeavours. Cultivating humanity should still be our mission in higher education, and each of us should be ready not only to argue for its importance, but put into practice what we argue for in theory. No one should under-estimate the enormous difficulty involved in facing the challenges to the humanities, but affirming our own conviction of the value of the humanities must be the first step we take if we are to bring about significant changes for human society.

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